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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
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RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000348

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: Where's Lukashenko?

Ref: Minsk 314

¶1. Summary: On March 28 the GOB indicated Lukashenko's inauguration would not take place March 31 as had been widely reported and prepared for. This followed an eight-day period where Lukashenko disappeared from public view. Only on March 28 did a wan and de-energized Lukashenko reappear for a very brief story on state news. The Presidential Administration told one news service Lukashenko was not seen publicly because he was "working with documents," which was the official excuse whenever Russia's Boris Yeltsin was incapacitated. This "disappearance" coincides with Lukashenko facing unprecedented criticism at home and abroad for blatantly undemocratic elections. It remains to be seen if and when Lukashenko fully returns to the scene, but his behavior is odd to most observers who feel he is suffering from stress, or simply avoiding further international opprobrium. End summary.

Inauguration Postponed, Lukashenko Missing for 8 Days

¶2. On March 28 the Central Election Commission announced that Lukashenko's inauguration, scheduled for March 31, would be postponed to sometime in the first half of April. CEC deputy Nikolay Lozovik told the press he did not know when the inauguration would now be held, but that the Presidential Administration would announce the date later. Lukashenko's last public appearance was on March 20, when he spoke for several hours on live TV on the previous day's elections (reftel). Russian and independent Belarusian press commented that President Aleksandr Lukashenko was not seen in public for the next eight days. He only reappeared for a very brief television appearance on March 28, where he looked ill and was not his usual demagogic self.

¶3. When subsequently asked by journalists why the inauguration was being postponed, Lozovik replied that it was not being postponed as no date had ever really been set. He claimed the March 31 date was just a proposal. However, the Japanese Embassy in Minsk told Poloff they received an invitation on March 24 to the March 31 inauguration. The Bulgarian and Turkish Ambassadors informed their EU counterparts they too had received invitations for March 31, but told the MFA they would not attend. The U.S. and EU embassies did not receive invitations.

TV Fixture Lukashenko Off the Air for 8 Days

¶4. Mundane coverage of Lukashenko's daily activities normally dominates the first 30 minutes of the daily state television news. However, state news did not show Lukashenko at all for eight days. On March 28, state news at 1500 showed a very brief clip, no more

than 30 seconds long, of a pale and worn Lukashenko addressing a handful of staff on the need for debureaucratization. Lukashenko was clearly not as energized as usual, and the meeting was not in his normal office, making it appear he has been ill. During this period state media has been busily trying to defend Lukashenko's election "victory" against all external and domestic challengers, without Lukashenko's presence or participation. PolAsst noted that it has been several years since Lukashenko disappeared from public sight for such a long period.

15. Lukashenko's web site has not updated its chronicle of his daily activities since March 23. Even the days before that showed scant activity, with Lukashenko apparently signing three decrees and having just two meetings in a week. For March 28 the site shows only that Lukashenko is participating in a "Conference on Perfecting the Structures of Organs of State Management." The news that day showed his speaking briefly to six senior staff, casting doubt on what sort of conference this was. On March 29, as if responding to speculation in the Russian press, the Presidential Administration's press office announced that Lukashenko would be holding a series of "working meetings."

"Working with Documents"

16. Russian radio station Ekho Moskvy reported on March 28 that it asked Lukashenko's press spokesman, Pavel Legkiy, about Lukashenko's absence. Legkiy replied, "In the period which you are talking about the head of state is working, maybe he simply had few less public appearances on television, but this is not anything to worry about. The president is healthy, he is working, these rumors are completely groundless and to some degree even a little absurd." Ekho Moskvy further reported that Lukashenko has not issued any statements in response to the congratulations he received for

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winning the election. Independent Belarusian news service Belorusskie Novosti reported on March 28 that when it queried the Presidential Administration on Lukashenko's status, it was told that, "The President is working with documents the past few days." Belorusskie Novosti pointed out that whenever Boris Yeltsin was incapacitated, the official story was that he was "working with documents."

Comment

17. Lukashenko's prolonged absence and the postponement of the presidential inauguration, to a date TBD, has stoked many rumors about Lukashenko's health. Lukashenko's brief reappearance on March 28 did not present a man celebrating winning his third presidential term with 83% of the vote. Instead he clearly looked sick. During the election period a number of people commented to us that Lukashenko looked to be under a great deal of stress and worried. The press has reported that no one knows why Lukashenko dropped from view, but it is exceedingly strange that he is keeping such a low profile now, when the opposition managed to hold a four day protest in Minsk's main square and when much of the international community is castigating Lukashenko and Belarus for the recent blatantly undemocratic elections. This absence raises the possibility that Lukashenko, neither rational nor level headed at the best of times, is recovering from stress or simply waiting until interest in Belarus dies down to avoid more criticism or even demonstrations. Milinkevich publicly called Lukashenko's absence a clear sign he is "seriously ill." Some sources claim Lukashenko is scheduled to travel to Moscow either April 1 and 2 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Union State treaty, but the Presidential Administration press office has refused to confirm any presidential travel. It remains to be seen if he makes this trip.

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